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AUTHOR Moore, Beatrice S.
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ABSTRACT

Teacher evaluation of student writing usually focuses on errors or inadequacies of the written product. One method of changing teacher attitudes is to conduct a writing workshop for department chairpersons to show the benefits and share the techniques of making writing an integral part of their particular disciplines. Such a workshop must address four areas of concern. First, there is currently a shift of emphasis from product to process in writing, and establishing a supportive climate of understanding and trust is necessary for success of in-class writing. Teachers must be eclectic in choosing techniques they can use comfortably and consistently with their students. Second, small group collaboration is useful in clarifying writing assignments. Students assume responsibility for their own learning while the teacher facilitates learning by observing and directing rather than explaining. Third, there is a place for a good grammar handbook when students edit their writing or when the teacher wishes to review a concept that is relevant to the writing at the moment. Teaching grammar in isolation, however, is not productive. And fourth, it is wise for teachers to be tolerant of dialect variations of students in urban classes, while conveying the importance of standard language to an audience. Teachers should consider the language experience approach when structuring and implementing learning activities for inexperienced writers. (HTH)

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MAKING CHANGES IN WRITING PROGRAMS FOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

In the various disciplines where writing is assigned, teachers generally evaluate or respond to student writing. This system of exchange usually focuses on errors or inadequacies of the written product. The notion is that the student must change for whatever reasons to make his writing adequate. We who are in positions of leadership must explore and suggest ways of effecting teacher change in response to students' needs. There is an important connection between teacher change and student progress. That teachers use writing as a tool for learning and a way for knowing is the basis for change.

One method of accomplishing this change is to conduct a writing workshop for department chairpersons to show the benefits and share the techniques of making writing an integral part of their particular disciplines. Chairpersons will in turn feedback strategies to their departments. Simply put, teachers from across the curriculum will be asked to look at writing in different ways. And with a corpus of strategies, teachers will be able to help their students learn the subject by writing to learn.

The implications of this teacher change will require no new materials, no increased class time, no special schedules, and no special funds. The concept of writing in the content areas is predicated on redirecting faculty talents and energies, not heralding new ones. The key factor is commitment--the determination to allow students to experience the process of writing.

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This is not to say that the task is easy. One is reminded of Mina Shaughnessy's outline of her odyssey in basic writing in which she capsuled one of the stages "Converting the Natives." Herein lies the challenge for there are teachers who are non-believers and skeptics. They do not see the connection between writing and learning processes. Our intention is to show by involving teachers in actual experiences of the writing process. If they can visualize the results they will understand the link between writing and learning. In addition, teachers in various disciplines should come to realize that the English department is not the sole guardian of reading, writing, and thinking. Nor should it be the protector and defender of literacy. All departments should feel obligated to work together to produce a literate community. The writer will address four areas of concern in the Writing Workshop and suggest strategies appropriate for high school teachers in the quest for the mastery of writing and liberal learning.

1. On Composing

Currently there is a shift of emphasis from product to process in writing. Teaching students to write is really teaching them to think. Thinking precedes writing. Composing an essay does not begin when the student puts pen to paper. An essential part of the total process takes place before the first word is written. The process is divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and revision--though these are not considered rigid and discrete. The teacher should take the student through the stages of composing. Before the student begins to write he must discover what he wants to say. In this period, also known as invention, the writer focuses on a subject

--on what he will say; on an audience--to whom he will say it; on the mode of delivery--how he will say it; on voice and tone--his own personality and attitude toward his subject.

The writer should be surfeited with ideas before he begins his draft. Donald Murray ("Teach writing as a Process not Product") describes prewriting as everything that takes place before the first draft, which takes about eighty-five percent of the writer's time. The teacher should allow for it and give students the opportunity to experience prewriting in class.

Prewriting may include thought processes in recording, reporting, making inferences, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing, synthesizing, classifying, generalizing. It may include researching, notemaking, outlining, brainstorming, or daydreaming. These thought processes foster language development in the content areas; however, the demands and constraints of each discipline should determine the writing task. Maimon (Writing in the Arts and Sciences) delineates writing as a form of social behavior. It is necessary, therefore, that students learn the conventions of purpose and audience within each discipline and thus control the features of the written code that pertain to it.

Janet Emig (The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders) contends that students do not spend much time prewriting for class assignments. They do not pause to contemplate what they have written, nor do not voluntarily revise school-sponsored writing. Her findings are corroborated by other researchers, including Beach, Mischel, and Stallard, who argue that good writers spend more time composing than poor writers. They also rethink and rework their essays in the process of writing.

Once the writing of the first draft is done, rewriting is the stage when the writer reconsiders, rethinks, and perhaps redesigns the writing. Murray says writing is rewriting. He terms the stages prevision, vision, and revision. During the stage of revision the teacher can motivate students not by giving answers, but by asking questions, or responding, or praising, or keeping silent, letting the student grope and stumble until he learns to discover his own voice. Writing then will be an opportunity for the student to grow.

Establishing a supportive climate of understanding and trust is necessary for the success of in-class writing. The setting should be a place where the writer not only writes but experiences in a conscious orderly way the stages of the composing process itself and become aware of his own development. Students must be active participants in their own writing and teachers must have patience to deal with young beginning writers in a supportive manner.

Recent research by Sondra Perl, Nancy Somers, and Sharon Pianko reveal that unskilled writers have truncated writing processes. Unskilled writers edit as they write to such a degree that it disturbs their thought patterns, so intent are they on getting surface features correct. We believe it is helpful for teachers to be familiar with some of the current research. It will give them a theoretical base for developing and planning classroom practices. Teachers must, however, tailor the findings to their teaching situations and to students' needs in order to achieve optimum results.

Teachers must, in a word, be eclectic, choosing techniques which they can use comfortable with their students and use them with a degree of consistency. Several schools of thought exist on the teaching of writing. Peter Elbow, for example, (Writing Without Teachers)

believes writing to be an organic developmental process in which one starts writing at the very beginning before he has meaning at all. In free writing Elbow says that meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with. Ken Macrorie (Telling Writing) supports the school of free writing. Instead of transaction of meaning into language, Elbow and Macrorie believe in shaping language into meaning. Donald Murray, on the other hand, (A Writer Teaches Writing) believes that students must first have meaning, must first discover what they want to say; then get it down into language. Another voice is Moffett (Teaching the Universe of Discourse) who in stressing inquiry and exploration would take away textbooks. He believes students learn to write through practice and feedback from their peers. In this way they gradually learn what moves another person, what makes him understand, and what may, in fact, impede the communication of thought and feeling.

Along with the range of approaches to the teaching of writing, teachers need a broad vision of heuristics translated into productive methods to help students write. Moreover, teachers should on occasions write with their students. This can be a positive insight for students into the trials and agonies of composing--and the joys as well.

2. On Assignments

The assignment is an important part of school work and attention should be given to it. Basically the assignment serves to review or reinforce work that has been done to introduce and prepare for work that is to come. It moves students to a state of readiness, keeping them in tune with the teacher's plans and goals. Very often,

however, assignments are given under adverse conditions and without clear explanations to the students of the task to be done. Imagine, if you will, a classroom at the end of the period just as the bell is ringing; students begin to charge from the room as the teacher screams, "Write a two page theme for tomorrow." For fear of being thought obtuse or inattentive, many students do not stop to ask for clarification of an assignment; rather, they may seek out other teachers and ask, "What does it mean? What does he/she want? What am I supposed to do?"

Small group collaboration can be a useful heuristic for clarifying an assignment. It can serve as a learning experience as Ken Bruffee points out in A Short Course in Writing. The teacher constructs the task, delineating steps to be followed. Within the framework of the small group there is oral reading, written responses, group discussion, recording feedback, and reaching of group consensus. Afterwards a summary from each small group is reported to the larger group, followed by discussion and questions. The entire group then arrives at a consensus on the scope, nature, and demands of the task.

The concept of small group collaboration puts the students at the center of their learning and can be used effectively in a variety of teaching situations in any discipline. Students assume responsibility for their own learning while the teacher facilitates learning by observing, listening, praising, questioning, and directing, rather than explaining.

Thom Hawkins (Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing) lists three areas of importance in group collaboration. The personal dimension shows learning as self-initiated. The parameters of the physical and social environment, interaction with peers all influence

attitudes and personalities within the group. The social dimension shows personal involvement in what happens to the group's identity. Members tend to be flexible and cooperative. The pedagogical dimension portrays a climate of trust created by the teacher who asks the right questions, listens, and gives support to group learning without obfuscating or intimidating. The teacher gives attention to the taskmaking and procedures, the time allotted, and the structure of the group--its heterogeneity and the responsibility of each student to contribute without dominating.

Students have powerful language in their heads and writing is a way of communicating it, but if they do not talk to each other, perceiving peers as audience, they will write in a vacuum. The parceled classroom, as Hawkins puts it, is a excellent way of moving from teacher-dominated learning to small group problem-solving to one on one. These structured situations give students opportunities to reach out, brain search, sort out, classify, organize, and finally arrange their thoughts in paragraph form.

3. On Teaching Grammar

Teaching general grammar by drills and exercises is not considered useful to the writer. Research by Mellon, O'Hare, Hunt, and others indicate no transfer of grammatical rules to writing. Teaching writing should be approached as a growth process rather than a corpus of isolated skills delineated in grammar books. There is a place for a good grammar handbook when students edit their writing or when the teacher wishes to review a concept that is relevant to the writing at the moment. Teaching grammar in isolation, however, is not productive.

Sentence combining, on the other hand, is an approach to teaching language. By and large, grammar books take the language apart, while sentence combining put the language together. Research shows that sentence combining enhances syntactic maturity. As children get older they tend to write longer sentences with modification and embedding. Sentence combining does transfer to student writing.

Another approach to teaching language is the expanded sentence--the 50-word sentence suggested by Shaughnessy (Errors and Expectations). Students are given a base unit and are asked to extend it to a 50-word sentence that has no coordinating or compound features in it. They must pack as much information as possible, using their instincts and imagination, visualizing details. The high school student should be advised to begin with 30 or fewer words, building up to fifty. These exercises in subject-verb expansion or in joining short sentences into longer units of meaning can be of tremendous value to the young writer who needs help with the language. If the student can perceive the subject-verb as a structure to which he can attach a large amount of information, this should help him to develop a clear meaning of "sentence sense."

4. On Dialect Variation

It is appropriate that teachers be tolerant of dialect variation of students in urban classes. On the one hand, forces argue for the "students' right to their own language." On the other hand, forces argue for the suppression of nonstandard dialect on the grounds that students will be judged by the language they use and thus will be denied entry into the mainstream of social and economic opportunities if they do not project edited English. Because inexperienced writers

show a dependence on spoken language, dialect variations are prevalent in their writing. Vygotsky (Thought and Language) notes that beginning writers must make two abstractions to connect word meaning, grammar, and spelling levels of coding in their writing. Meaning must be represented first in oral language; then oral language is represented in writing. Experienced writers have outgrown the dependence on speech; therefore, they use written language more directly to symbolize meanings. Inexperienced writers do not have this competency.

Rather than choose sides in the controversy of bidialectism, teachers ought to make the two sides compatible; this is, they should treat one problem at a time. James Collins elaborates in "Dialect Variation and Writing" the approach teachers might take. Until students become familiar with written language through reading, thinking, and writing, spoken language will dominate their writing. Problems of meaning, therefore, should take precedence over problems of wording, chiefly because the students' language is a very personal possession. In responding to students' writings, the teacher should not worry about mistakes in language until she has helped them with the most important problem of representing meaning. Timing, then, is crucial. To introduce correcting errors too early in the writing process can stymie the flow of ideas by making the students feel inadequate about their language, their writing, and themselves. Once the writing has something to say, students can better take correction of dialect errors. Once the meaning is clear, attacking language errors will not appear threatening. The writers' self-esteem is raised from the act of getting their thoughts on paper. Then the teacher can identify and classify the kinds of errors prevalent in students' writing and devise strategies for the students to work them out.

The language experience approach is recommended for inexperienced writers. These students come with a heritage rich in story, song, and dance. Teachers should consider this when structuring and implementing learning activities. Again there should be the kind of classroom climate that is sensitive in developing positive self-concepts which in turn will motivate learning. Teachers should realize the effect their opinions have on their students. A single remark by a teacher may influence a student's feelings about writing. It may encourage or discourage. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to write about the experiences which they can relate to. Thinking is at the heart of the writing process. Van Allen and Lee (Learning to Read Through Experience) elucidate "What they think about they can say. What they say can be written. What they write about they can read. They can read what they have written and what others have written."

Finally, no writing program will achieve its aim without giving students individual attention. There must be some class time for one to one instruction. Writing is an evolving process, never quite finished. It is not the volume of writing, but the amount that is responded by the teacher and revised by the student that insures success. Quality time in guiding the student is a positive influence in the learning process. Clearly, the successful teacher is one who learns from his students as spoke Chaucer of his cleric scholar, "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach."

Beatrice S. Moore, Chairperson
Simon Gratz High School
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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